

**WILLIAMSBURG CITY COUNCIL  
WORK SESSION  
SEPTEMBER 10, 2007**

The Williamsburg City Council held a work session on Monday, September 10, 2007, at 2:00 p.m., in the City Council Chambers of the Stryker Building.

**ATTENDANCE**

Present were Ms. Zeidler, Messrs. Haulman, Chohany, Freiling, and Braxton. Also present were City Manager Tuttle, City Attorney Phillips, and City Clerk Crist.

Staff Attending: Assistant City Manager Miller, Assistant City Attorney Workman, Economic Development Director DeWitt, Department Heads Nester and Serra, and IT Manager Barham.

**CALL TO ORDER**

Mayor Zeidler called the meeting to order.

**OPEN FORUM**

Mayor Zeidler invited citizen comment.

**John Hall, city resident**, addressed Council about the importance of having a library and educational building in the central downtown area. They are a compliment and focal point of a city or county. He suggested people call the library to be educated about what is or is not offered at the two branches of the library.

**Stewart Goddin, 715 Goodwin Street**, spoke regarding Proposed Ordinance #07-38, on the September 13 Council agenda. He was pleased that his comments, and others, were taken into account by staff. He felt that certain aspects of the ordinance addressing record keeping requirements for transients/motel employees may need more clarification. Citizens may be interested in how the data will be collected and analyzed by city staff.

No one else wished to speak. The open forum session was closed.

**Background Presentations/Discussion**

**Information Technology Update—IT Manager Mark Barham**

Mr. Tuttle introduced Mr. Barham to provide Council with an update regarding the city's Information Technology systems.

Mr. Barham reviewed Powerpoint slides of the following information (see slides attached).

- Completed projects
- GIS project status
- Williamsburg WiFi
- Statistics of city bills paid online for FY 2007
- Statistics of sessions and hits on the city's website
- Website redesign plans

- Future expansions and rewriting of applications

Mayor Zeidler thanked Mr. Barham for his presentation. Mr. Barham and Council members discussed many IT issues

- Request of a report to show who is visiting the city's website and what types of information they are trying to obtain.
- On a recent visit to the city, the Secretary of Technology for the Commonwealth indicated his interest in expanding WiFi. He offered that his office might be helpful with providing models of public entity and private service providers.
- Tracking E-government usage for payment of personal property taxes, etc.
- Expansion of WiFi: There are three municipal models: city managed, public-private, and use of an Internet service provider.
- Connectivity with other WiFi systems is complicated and should offer protections.
- GIS: compatibility between the city system and MAC.
- Internet payment methods: Quick Check and Credit Card.
- The Property Information System will soon include photographs of properties and land.
- Real Time News; mass e-mails/text messaging as alerting systems.
- Hardware and software life-cycle management.
- The decline in WiFi sessions and hits.
- Employee use of the city's Intranet site and Internet.
- Potential of the GIS System, such as development of water/sewer/stormwater distribution layers and aiding public safety personnel.
- WiFi access at the city's Transportation Center.

Mr. Braxton suggested that this presentation be placed on the city's website.

Mayor Zeidler thanked Mr. Barham for his report about the city's information technology and systems.

### **Evaluation of City's Property Tax Relief Program**

Reference for this item was Mr. Tuttle's report dated September 6, 2007. The Mayor noted that City Council had asked the City Manager for information regarding tax relief for elderly and disabled citizens.

Mr. Tuttle reviewed the information provided in his report. Council adopted an initiative to re-examine the city's policy for homeowner tax relief to qualified city residents to increase affordability of owner occupied housing in the city. The City Code provides for deferral of all or part of property taxes for certain people over age 65 and for the disabled. The income limits is a maximum of \$50,000 and the maximum net worth is limited at \$214,000 for the 2008 deferral program. When a property is sold, the taxes are satisfied at that point. The current interest rate charged by the city is 8%, which may be reasonable compared to bank rates, but is a deterrent to participation in the program. He reported on other localities that have some form of exemption for part of the taxes on dwellings, usually on a sliding scale.

Mr. Tuttle said there were options:

- Improve the existing deferral program by lowering the interest rate. Staff recommended a range of 3-5%, with some form of a tax exemption for lower income.
- Some form of tax exemption; freezing the tax payment with no future increases.
- Homestead Exemption: This bill was approved by the 2007 General Assembly to allow an exemption or deferral of up to 20% of the value of residential property. That exemption must be passed again in 2008.

Mr. Tuttle said that this information was provided without a formal recommendation at this time.

Council and Mr. Tuttle discussed:

- City resident participation in the tax relief program is less than other communities.
- The higher interest rate on deferred taxes is a concern to residents. It is compounded every year. Residents are concerned about their heirs.
- Mr. Phillips cited the Dillon Rule. The city must act within the confines of the General Assembly's actions. State law is specific about tax deferral and interest being paid at the time of death of a property owner or sale of property.
- Improvements to homes increase values, which results in increased assessments and taxes.

Council members and Mr. Tuttle discussed the current tax relief program and possible ways to assist elderly and disabled property owners. The current percentage of interest on deferrals seemed high to members. Some residents may not understand how the program works. The Homestead Act was a concern because should the Council take some type of action now and it later conflicts with the Act, it could be difficult to reverse or change. It was suggested that Council take an accurate look at the percentages of people in our locality, and others, that are eligible for the program and noted that the city's tax rate is low compared to others. Council felt the need to address this complicated issue because they want to help people to stay in their homes.

Council members concurred that the percentage of interest should be lowered, perhaps to the rate of inflation. Mayor Zeidler asked that the City Manager study the rate of inflation and bring a recommendation to Council.

Mr. Tuttle suggested that if Council takes action by October that would provide enough time for citizens to be advised of any change to take effect with the December tax bills. An article could be included in the next *Quarterly Quill*.

Mayor Zeidler suggested that the city's support of the Homestead Act be added to the 2008 Legislative Agenda. Mr. Haulman asked that staff provide Council information at the next work session about exemption programs for low income families in other communities, what would work best for the city, and how it could be implemented in the city.

Mr. Tuttle will provide Council with a report from the Weldon Cooper Center about various tax relief programs from Virginia localities. He intended to prepare a draft ordinance for the October Council meetings.

## **City Council Communications**

**September 8, 2007 Retreat:** Mayor Zeidler reported that two changes will be effective as of the October Council meetings:

Encourage public comment and public input: The Mayor said that Council encourages citizens to comment about regular agenda items and action items during open forum at the work session. This will give Council time to consider comments before action at the regular meeting.

Work Session Time to Change from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.: Council agreed to change the meeting time of the monthly work session to 4:00 p.m. for a period of six months to see if the new time encourages citizen attendance and participation.

Hampton Roads Transportation Authority: Mayor Zeidler is the city's representative. She reported that at the second meeting of the Authority, it did agree and vote to implement the taxes and fees allowed in the legislation, but also agreed to delay implementation of the taxes and fees until after the General Assembly session next year. Most members believed that improvements were needed in the legislation, and by waiting to implement the fees and taxes, it was hoped there would be changes to make the legislation more agreeable. Two committees were formed: a Legislative Committee to look at the legislation components and a Public Outreach Committee (Mayor Zeidler to chair). Both committee meetings are open and will take public comment, and may, at some point, be televised.

9/11 Remembrance & Freedom Walk, Tuesday, September 11, 2007, 5:15 p.m. Mayor Zeidler reminded everyone that the event will honor first responders. Everyone will gather at Merchants Square and walk down Duke of Gloucester Street for a ceremony at the Colonial Capital.

Braxton Court Redevelopment Program: Mr. Braxton referenced the September 5, 2007 *Virginia Gazette* article summarizing the renovation project. The article was well done. He thanked the City Council for paving the way, the public works department for the coordination and implementation of infrastructure upgrade and replacement, and the Housing Administration for its sponsorship of the rehabilitation housing. On behalf of the citizens of Braxton Court, thank you.

Weekend Block Parties to Welcome Back Students: Mr. Chohany commended the city for its sponsorship and leadership to welcome back students.

Neighborhoods Council Meeting: Mr. Chohany noted that Mr. Kranbuehl, Chair of the Beautification Advisory Committee, made a presentation about the redesign of landscaping along a section of Lafayette Street. Citizens enjoyed the presentation and appreciated the work of the group. Council will see the presentation at some point.

Solicitors Permit: Mr. Chohany said that citizens would like for approved solicitors to carry some type of credentials in order for them to know that solicitors have been authorized by the city.

Virginia Preschool Initiative: Mr. Freiling mentioned that the Mayor, Mr. Braxton, Mr. Tuttle and he, attended the Governor's presentation. Mr. Braxton will provide copies to the Council to read.

### **Preview of September 13 Council Meeting**

No additional information.

### **Schedule of Meetings: September 2007**

Council members received the monthly meeting calendar.

Day of Caring: Mr. Tuttle noted that September 10 is the United Way Day of Caring. City employees will be working in the park at Highland Park on landscaping improvements.

### **OPEN FORUM**

Mayor Zeidler invited public comment.

**John Hall** addressed Council about senior/disabled citizens and exemption program from taxes. A James City County representative told him almost two years ago that the county's tax exemption program is a forgiveness of property tax for seniors and the disabled. They have a \$200,000 asset test, exempt one car, and one acre of property. A York County representative told him that it exempts up to ten acres, with a \$300,000 asset level test. Different localities have different income levels.

No one else wished to speak. The session was closed.

The meeting adjourned at 3:25 p.m.

Approved: October 11, 2007

Jeanne Zeidler  
Mayor

Shelia Y. Crist, MMC  
Clerk of Council